Senate Statistics

Secretaries of the Senate

Walter Lowrie (1825-1836)

Secretary of the Senate Walter Lowrie literally had a front-row seat on American history. From the secretary's desk at the front of the old Senate chamber, he witnessed such bitterly contentious events as the Webster-Hayne debates over the nature of the Union, the Senate censure of President Andrew Jackson for usurping congressional power, the first Senate rejection of a presidential cabinet nominee, and the investigation of a Mississippi senator for allegedly plotting to assassinate Jackson.

The third person to serve as secretary of the Senate was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on December 10, 1784. At the age of seven, Walter Lowrie moved with his parents, two brothers, and four sisters to a small farm in central Pennsylvania. Eight years later, the family packed their belongings and crossed the Allegheny Mountains to a larger farm in western Pennsylvania's Butler County. As a young man in this rough frontier setting, Lowrie worked long hours herding livestock and cutting timber, which he then transported on a dangerous river journey south to Pittsburgh. Realizing that a formal education offered his only hope of escape from such unpromising physical toil, he sought a tutor. As one of his biographers observed, "The task of becoming an educated man in Western Pennsylvania was not easy during the early 1800s; it required many qualities, among which were perseverance, initiative, desire to get ahead, and the will to win."

As Lowrie considered his career options in 1802, he attended one of the religious revival meetings that were then popular in the nation's frontier regions. Later, he described what happened to him there. "At one of these meetings, the exercises of my mind became extremely painful and distressing. To convey a correct idea of this sensation to others is perhaps impossible. In an instant I felt that the will had no power or control over the muscles of the body. I fell backwards and suffered violent agitations, particularly of the arms." Lowrie took this experience as a sign that he should pursue a religious vocation. He began his studies for the Presbyterian ministry by boarding with the Reverend John McPherrin, an accomplished scholar who owned a large library. Within three years, Lowrie had become proficient in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. At the conclusion of his studies, he married McPherrin's daughter, Amelia.

In 1807, at the age of twenty-three and with the prospect of a family to support, Lowrie abandoned his plans for the ministry and took on several jobs simultaneously, including those of school teacher, shopkeeper, county clerk, and justice of the peace. These concurrent occupations helped raise his profile among the region's political leaders and led to yet another job—state legislator. Lowrie served in the Pennsylvania house of representatives from 1811 to 1812 and in the state senate from 1813 to 1819. He expanded his range of political contacts through service on a committee that oversaw the move of the state capital from Lancaster to Harrisburg and also as chairman of a five-state commission to improve Ohio River navigation. In 1818, the state legislature elected him to a full term in the United States Senate.

When Walter Lowrie arrived in the Senate chamber at the convening of the Sixteenth Congress on December 6, 1819, he found a spirit of celebration dampened with a sense of dread for the future. While senators admired their newly reconstructed chamber, available for the first time since the British burned the Capitol five years earlier, many worried that the increasingly volatile issue of slavery in the nation's territories threatened to tear the nation apart. Although Lowrie firmly opposed the expansion of slavery, he worked hard to develop good relations with southern members on the other side of the issue. His son later described him in that period as a natural mediator, as "a man of firm, yet not aggressive nor partisan views."

Senator Lowrie quickly joined the debate over the Missouri Compromise. Facing the prospect of national disunion, he closed one of his speeches by saying, "If the alternative be this: either dissolution of the Union or the extension of slavery over this whole western country, I for one will choose the former."

At the start of his Senate service, Lowrie won a seat on the Public Lands Committee; a year later he joined two new committees created to address pressing problems of that day: the Committee on Indian Affairs and the Committee on Roads and Canals. In 1821, he gave up his Indian Affairs seat to gain a coveted place on the Senate Finance Committee. In the following congressional session, Lowrie jumped ahead of more senior members to become chairman of the Finance Committee. He held that post, however, for only one session. On Finance, he actively promoted Pennsylvania's commercial interests and sought legislation to set tariffs high enough to protect his state's iron, glass, and textile industries' interests from foreign competition.

In Lowrie's time, the Pennsylvania legislature considered service in the U.S. Senate to be a temporary honor. In the thirty years from the Senate's first meeting in 1789 until Lowrie took his seat in 1819, the state legislature had selected twelve individuals to occupy its two Senate seats. Not one of those senators served more than a full six-year term. Accordingly, when Lowrie's term expired in March 1825, he looked for other employment. His extensive legislative experience and wide respect among his Senate colleagues made him an obvious candidate for the post of Senate secretary.

The Senate had elected its first two secretaries, Samuel Otis and Charles Cutts, to serve open-ended terms. At a time of rapid turnover among members, it was important to have

officers who carried over from one Congress to the next. During his quarter-century in office, however, Samuel Otis encountered senators who criticized him for not keeping the journal up to date and for not paying the Senate's bills on time. For Otis, that criticism ended when he died in office. When similar recurrent complaints arose about Cutts, the Senate provided a different remedy. In 1824, after he had been in office for ten years, the Senate changed its rules to require election of its officers at the start of each new Congress. Under the first use of this revised rule, on December 12, 1825, Secretary Cutts lost his office in a three-way contest with Lowrie and State Department chief clerk Asbury Dickins. Lowrie won the race with twenty-three of the forty-one votes cast. (Although Dickins lost in 1825, be ran again after Lowrie's retirement in 1836 and held the post for the next quarter century.)

Walter Lowrie could not have chosen a more exciting time to serve as secretary. His eleven years in that post coincided with two periods that future historians dubbed the "Golden Age of the Senate" and the "Era of Andrew Jackson." The Senate's Golden Age began in the 1820s and continued for at least three more decades. As the slavery issue intensified, the Senate, with its equal number of slave states and free states, became the principal battleground for contesting that issue. From the 1820s until the Civil War, when new states entered the Union, they were admitted in slave-state, free-state pairs so as not to disturb that balance. In the five years between 1827 and 1832, the North, the South, and the West acquired articulate new Senate voices with the arrival of Daniel Webster, John C. Calhoun, and Henry Clay. These three men—the Senate's "Great Triumvirate"—helped elevate the Senate's popular image from that of a quiet debating society to a dynamic legislative forum.

The resulting political turbulence over slavery soon brought a new alignment of political parties. Although Andrew Jackson won the greatest number of popular and electoral votes in the 1824 presidential election contest, none of that race's four active candidates gained an Electoral College majority. Subsequently, the House of Representatives awarded the victory to John Quincy Adams, who had run second to Jackson in both popular and electoral votes. Jackson's campaign to gain the presidency in 1828 dominated political debate for the next four years. In the 1828 rematch, he defeated Adams and began an eight-year administration that profoundly reshaped American political life. For the entire period of Walter Lowrie's secretaryship, fierce struggles between the Jacksonians and the Henry Clay-led opposition resounded through the Senate chamber and across the nation.

By 1836, Lowrie seemed to have tired of this high drama. Within the previous four years, death had claimed his wife and one daughter. Still pursuing his earlier call to a religious vocation—he had founded one of the first Senate prayer groups—he resigned as secretary of the Senate at the start of the December session to accept a post in New York City as secretary of foreign missions for the Presbyterian Church in America. He remained in that office for more than three decades until his death on December 14, 1868. He is buried in the crypt of the First Presbyterian Church in New York City.